



# Sinai Syriac Manuscripts in Exile

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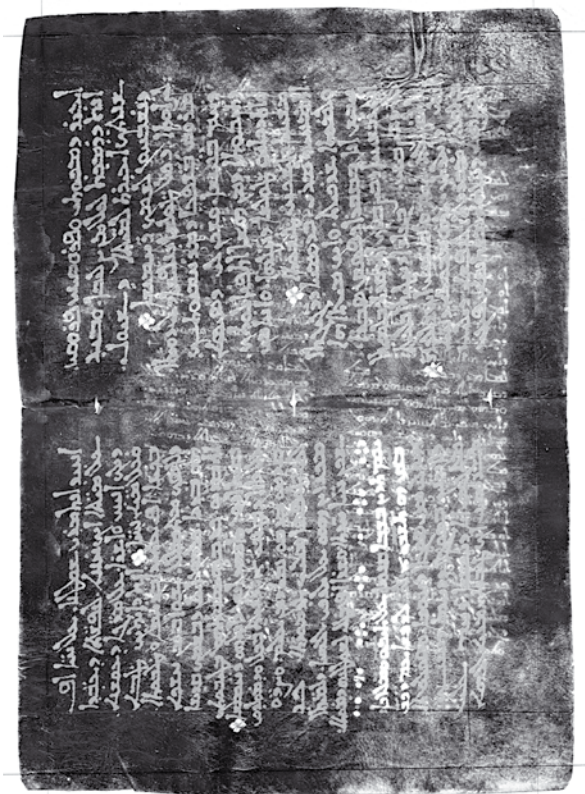
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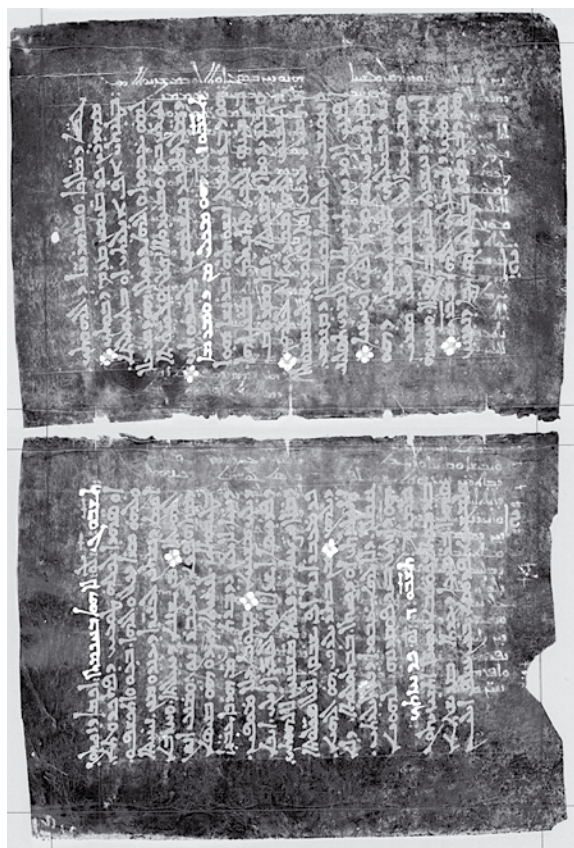


## SINAI SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS IN EXILE

GRIGORY KESSEL AND NATALIA SMELOVA



1 SGP, fol. 120r-121v (*On Simple Drugs*, Book Three), CVA processed. The quire signature *nam* (six) can be seen bottom right.



2 SGP, fol. 117r-124v, CVA processed. The end of Book Two and the *pinax* (list of chapters) of Book Three.

It is a well-known fact that anybody interested in the Sinai manuscripts in a particular language (Greek, Syriac, Arabic, Georgian, Slavonic and so on) must take into consideration not only the old collection and the New Finds, unearthed in 1975, but also a third group, the diaspora manuscripts, manuscripts once kept at the monastery but now dispersed. This third group is the most elusive in terms of exact numbers and location. Many diaspora manuscripts were apparently removed illicitly, and their actual whereabouts are not always easy to ascertain. Sadly, the library of Saint Catherine's, celebrated for its exceptional holdings, has become nearly as well known for the manuscripts that are no longer there. The famous Codex Sinaiticus (now British Library Add. 43725) takes pride of place among them.

It is hardly possible to give an estimate of the total number of dispersed manuscripts. The task of finding and identifying these orphan-like manuscripts is far from easy and rarely attracts scholars. So it is all the more welcome that, in the case of Syriac manuscripts of Sinaitic provenance, the majority, in particular those on parchment, have been masterfully identified by Paul Géhin<sup>1</sup>.

According to the catalogue of Murad Kamil, the old collection of Syriac manuscripts consists of 266 items, some 60 of which are on parchment and the rest on paper. The New Finds comprise 170 more or less complete manuscripts (including nine in Christian Palestinian Aramaic) and 100 fragments (including 18 in Christian Palestinian Aramaic). Some of these manuscripts were originally associated with items in the old collection, but the vast majority were previously unknown. In addition, according to the new study of Géhin, 37 Syriac manuscripts of Sinaitic provenance can be found in various libraries and collections worldwide.

It is not always easy to ascertain whether a manuscript or fragment once belonged to the monastery's collection, not least because the majority of Sinai manuscripts were never catalogued in detail. The photographs of the collection made for the Library of Congress by the Mount Sinai Expedition of 1949-50 are of course invaluable, although the black and white microfilms sometimes prove unusable.<sup>2</sup> It is hoped therefore that a new catalogue of the Syriac manuscripts, prepared according to current cataloguing practices, would assist in the identification of orphan manuscripts. By the same token, comprehensive digitization would do much to further research into the manuscripts and the identification of their dispersed parts.

Slow as it may be, the progress of scholarship makes it possible to identify a particular manuscript as originating from the monastery's collection. In the pages that follow, we would like to present some of the Syriac diaspora manuscripts, with a particular focus on the Syriac Galen Palimpsest (pictured left 1 and 2), the manuscript that has recently become the subject of a major research project.

*The Book of Perfection* by Sahdona/Martyrius (early seventh century), an introduction to the life of spiritual perfection, is one of the notable works of the Syriac monastic tradition. Translated into Georgian and Arabic,

it apparently enjoyed widespread popularity.<sup>3</sup> Unlike other Syriac monastic works of this period, which have many quotations from the Patristic literature, Sahdona's text features mostly Biblical references, with only a few non-Biblical borrowings.

The sole surviving copy of the text is preserved in a manuscript housed today in Strasbourg's Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire (BNU 4116). This manuscript is a rare document that attests to the special significance that the Sinai monastery held for Syriac Christians. The manuscript was produced in Edessa in the year 837 CE and was subsequently donated to 'the shrine of Mar Moses on the Holy Mountain of Sinai'. It must have left the monastery by the end of the 19th century and is no longer intact. Fragments deriving from the manuscript have been identified in the Russian National Library (Syr. New Series 13), Biblioteca Ambrosiana (A 296 inf, ff. 131-42) and Mingana Collection, Birmingham (Mingana Syr. 650). Another fragment identified among the New Finds by Sebastian Brock (M45N) made it possible to prove that this unique manuscript was indeed originally preserved at Saint Catherine's Monastery.

The *Codex Climaci Rescriptus*, one of the famous Sinai palimpsests, left the monastery sometime in the second half of the 19th century and was subsequently acquired by Agnes Smith Lewis, who was not aware of its Sinaitic provenance<sup>4</sup>. The manuscript was kept at Westminster College, Cambridge until 2009, when it was put on sale at Sotheby's. In 2010, it was purchased by the Green family for the Bible Museum in Washington, DC. The overtext of the palimpsest contains the Syriac translation of John Climacus's *Ladder of Paradise* (hence the title), which remains so far unpublished. This is all the more surprising given its obvious significance, not only for the history of Syriac Christianity (one regularly finds excerpts from the *Ladder* in the monastic miscellanies) but also for the textual study of the Greek original. While the earliest manuscript evidence in Greek dates back to the 10th century, the recorded Syriac tradition starts in the 8th century at the least. As we know today, the codex was produced, presumably in the 9th century, using recycled leaves of no fewer than eight different manuscripts. Six of the leaves are fragments of the Old and New Testament in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and two are Gospel fragments in Greek. The manuscript is incomplete and lacks a number of folios. One of them is kept in Birmingham (Mingana Syr. 637). Again, the felicitous discovery of a fragment among the New Finds (M38N) clearly demonstrated that the manuscript was once the property of the monastery.

Another important palimpsest originating from Sinai is Vatican Syr. 623, with a fragment preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris Syr. 378/II). The manuscript reached the Vatican Library through the German manuscript collector Friedrich Grote, who by the end of the 19th century had built, under unknown circumstances, an impressive collection of manuscripts and fragments with a Sinaitic provenance. The codex was completed in 886 CE in the 'monastery of Mar Moses'

and is therefore considered to be the oldest dated Syriac manuscript produced on Sinai. It contains a number of monastic and hagiographical works, three of them testifying to the history of monasticism on Sinai: Pseudo-Ammonius's *Report Concerning the Slaughter of the Monks of Sinai and Rhaitou*, *Tales of the Sinai Fathers* by Anastasius of Sinai, and Pseudo-Nilus's *Narrations*.<sup>5</sup> Curiously, among the monastic texts is a fragment of Sahdona/Martyrius's *Book of Perfection* that apparently was copied directly from the above-mentioned Edessene manuscript of 837 CE, donated to the monastery just a few decades earlier. Roughly half the codex is a palimpsest (fol. 105-226, some folios being double palimpsests), with the undertext containing fragments in five different languages: Greek, Arabic, Armenian, Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic. The texts that have been identified include a previously unattested Arabic version of Theon of Alexandria's Commentary on Ptolemy's *Handy Tables*, and fragments of two comedies of Menander, one of which was previously unknown.<sup>6</sup>

Among the Syriac palimpsests originating from Mount Sinai, one of the most outstanding in terms of importance and scholarly engagement is the Syriac Galen Palimpsest (SGP). This valuable manuscript is now owned by a private collector in the United States, who purchased it from Sotheby's in March 2002. In 2009 and 2010 the owner initiated the conservation of the manuscript (which involved dis- and rebinding) and its multispectral digital imaging, both undertaken at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. Following this, high-resolution images were made freely available online, now hosted by the University of Pennsylvania Libraries at their OPenn portal, URL: <http://digitalgalen.net>.

The *scriptio superior* of the SGP presents a particular form of the *Oktōēchos* containing canons for the weekdays, *kanōnes parakletikoí*, of mixed Sabbaitic-Constantinopolitan origin, which apparently testify to the introduction of a new standard version of liturgical book in the Melkite communities in and around the city of Antioch in the late 10th and 11th centuries, following the Byzantine reconquest of Syria and Anatolia.

Already in the early 20th century, the primary identification of the *scriptio inferior* of the palimpsest was proposed by Anton Baumstark for the Hiersemann's sales catalogue of 1922. He recognised the text as a medical work of utmost importance. However, the first definite identification was made some 80 years later when Sebastian Brock established that the text was part of the Syriac translation of Galen's *On Simple Drugs* produced in the sixth century by Sergius of Reš 'Aynā (d. 536), otherwise known in a single sixth- or early seventh-century manuscript from the British Library, Add. 14661. Fragments from Books Six to Eight, also preserved in the British Library manuscript, were recognised throughout the palimpsest. However, taking into account that the SGP is considerably more extensive than the former, Siam Bhayro and other scholars working on the palimpsest at this earlier stage had assumed that it contained fragments of other parts

of Galen's treatise, which consists of 11 books in total. A short time afterwards, Grigory Kessel was able to provide corroborating evidence for this, having identified the first passages from Books Two, Four and Nine. Thanks to Grigory Kessel's successful efforts in finding missing leaves from the SGP in the Vatican Library, Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, Houghton Library and among the New Finds of Saint Catherine's Monastery, the secondary manuscript was reconstituted in full.

Since 2015, the SGP has become the focus of a major project at the University of Manchester entitled 'The Syriac Galen Palimpsest: Galen's *On Simple Drugs* and the Recovery of Lost Texts through Sophisticated Imaging Techniques', headed by Professor Peter E. Pormann and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/M005704/1; September 2015 to February 2020).

The philological interest apart, the starting point for the project was the application of an advanced computational method of post-processing – the Canonical Variates Analysis (CVA), or Linear Discriminant Analysis (LDA) – to the digital multispectral images, realised by Bill Sellers. The Digital Humanities methods included the creation of a bilingual Graeco-Syriac corpus for Books Six to Eight of Galen's treatise within the Sketch Engine platform, which enables cross-search by word, sequence of letters or phrase, with additional search criteria such as context. All the described methods were successfully utilised by Naima Afif and Natalia Smelova, allowing them to identify the entire palimpsest, with the exception of three folios which remain unreadable so far.

In parallel to this, a collation chart for the codicology of the original medical manuscript was created based on the textual identifications and the study of the parchment, mostly from the pre-conservation colour photographs of the bound palimpsest (<http://www.thedigitalwalters.org/Data/OtherCollections/html/PC4/>). It was established that the original manuscript must have consisted of at least 22 quinions (quires of five bifolia, amounting to ten folios), 14 of which have survived in full or in part. The parchment is folded flesh side in, and thus each quire begins and ends with the hair side. As it was possible to recognise two quire signatures in Syriac numerals – *ḥaww* for quire six (see illustration 1) and *ṯēṯ* for quire nine, it could be deduced that three quires were missing from the beginning of the manuscript and that the preserved text starts with quire four. One full quire is missing in the middle of the codex, and at least four quires are missing at the end. This would suggest that the original manuscript must have been imperfect due to a damaged binding prior to palimpsesting.

The results of the identification, supported by the codicological reconstruction, are as follows: the original medical manuscript of the SGP most probably contained the whole of Galen's *On Simple Drugs*, of which fragments of Books Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight and Nine have survived. Thanks to the identification of the quire signatures, one can surmise that three missing quinions at the beginning contained the whole of Book One and the first chapter of Book Two. It seems very

likely that Book One was preceded by a long translator's introduction to the work, probably with some added material, perhaps another work, rather shorter than the main treatise. The text preserved in the SGP starts with the second chapter of Book Two and continues through to the third chapter of Book Nine. Each book is preceded by a *pinax*, a list of chapters. (See illustration 2.) Some (Books Six, Seven and Eight) include the preface of the translator Sergius. (These prefaces also survive in the British Library manuscript and were published with a German translation by Adalbert Merx). A preface may also appear at the beginning of Book Nine, although the folio cannot be easily read. From what one can ascertain at this stage, only Book Three is preserved in full; all the other books contain lacunae, from one folio (Book Five) to one quire (Book Six).

Although some fascinating discoveries have already been made, the most demanding and rewarding task lies ahead, as the Manchester team embarks on the preparation of a critical edition of Galen's *On Simple Drugs* in Syriac.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Paul Géhin, *Les manuscrits syriques de parchemin du Sinai et leurs membra disjecta* (CSCO 665; Subs. 136). Leuven: Peeters, 2017.
2. The microfilms have been digitized recently by the Library of Congress and are now freely available (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/manuscripts-in-st-catherines-monastery-mount-sinai/>).
3. Its edition and French translation were prepared by André de Halleux and published in the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, vol. 200-01, 214-15, 252-53, 254-55 (1960, 1961, 1965).
4. See Agnes Smith Lewis, *Codex Climaci Rescriptus: Fragments of Sixth Century Palestinian Syriac Texts of the Gospels, of the Acts of the Apostles and of St. Paul's Epistles, also Fragments of an Early Palestinian Lectionary of the Old Testament, etc.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909, pp. XI-XII. The manuscript came into the possession of Lewis in three parts: one folio was purchased in Cairo in 1895; 89 folios were acquired from a Berlin scholar in 1905; and 48 folios were purchased, again in Egypt, in 1906.
5. The English translation of these and other historical accounts can be found in D. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai. Translated Texts for Historians*, 53. Liverpool, 2010.
6. Francesco D'Aiuto, 'Graeca in codici orientali della Biblioteca Vaticana (con i resti di un manoscritto tardoantico delle commedie di Menandro)', in L. Perria (ed.), *Tra Oriente e Occidente: scritture e libri greci fra le regioni orientali di Bisanzio e l'Italia*, Rome: Università di Roma La Sapienza, 2003, pp. 266-83.
7. For an up-to-date presentation of the project's current results, see Afif, N., Arsene, C., Bhayro, S., Calà, I., Daccache, J., Hawley, R., Kessel, G., Pormann, P.E., Sellers, W., Smelova, N., 'Continuing research on the Syriac Galen Palimpsest: Collaborative Implementation within the Framework of Two European Projects', *Semitica et Classica* 9 (2017), pp. 261-68; Afif, N., Bhayro, S., Kessel, G., Pormann, P.E., Sellers, W.I., Smelova, N., 'The Syriac Galen Palimpsest. A Tale of Two Texts', *Manuscript Studies. A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies* 3.1 (2018), pp. 111-154; Afif, N., Bhayro, S., Pormann, P.E., Sellers, W.I., Smelova, N., 'Analyzing Images, Editing Texts: The Manchester Project', *Manuscript Studies. A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies* 3.1 (2018), pp. 155-185.